1: Herskovits & Herskovits E-5 (1928-1929) 1934
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KUNU

We sat one night talking about the neku vine, which is used to poison the streams for fishing, and the ceremonies attending the discovery of a new one, how the ownership of it is passed on in the female line, and about the songs which are sung to celebrate the finding, and the feast which is given at this time.

"Do you use this poison only to catch fish, or does it have other uses?" we asked guardedly.

"Well, sometimes people use it to commit suicide," one man said. "That is bad. Sometimes a man or a woman will do it to put a kunu on another's family." He went on to tell of a man who lately did this. He had been promised the daughter of a family in this very village when the girl was a small, small child. It happened that the girl's uncles found gold in one of the streams, for which the white man gave them much goods, and now they were big men. Since the girl's children would inherit much wealth, they wanted her to be the principal wife of a man of rank. There were messages back and forth, and council meetings, but the uncles insisted that the girl return the gifts she had received —insisted against the advice of many people. So this *kio*, this young lad, could get his revenge in no other way than by taking his own life, and sending a kunu to the family.

"The next time you come you will probably see the kunu at work. It is always so. Of what use is wealth when the children begin to die? One year the crops are bad, and you have to buy food. One year you go from one obia man to the next to find out why your sister cannot make children. Your money goes. Kunu is a bad thing."

Another day a woman came to us with a comb to sell. She had heard that we were gathering pieces to put into a large house where carvings from Africa were being shown, and she wanted us to have this comb of hers which was made as a betrothal gift by her husband who was now many years dead. It was an old comb with several broken tines and holes bored into it by insects, but the decorated end was still very beautiful, and we were eager to buy it. When we asked her to explain to us the meaning of the design, she

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684 [196] be. The Earth Mother, who is the giver of fertility, takes the adulterous woman who is with child under her protection, and no one may harm her. But the guilty man must make redress to the betrayed husband. Fines must be paid by the adulterer, and there is the beating which the husband administers. This beating has its ritual. The culprit, at the time that is set, comes out to the place where the injured husband and his family wait. They attack him with bare fists, although the Kromanti arm obias are sometimes slipped down on clenched hands, and with these serious wounds can be inflicted. With or without the iron arm bands, the beating is a serious matter, and the man who has committed the trespass is severely mishandled, unless he can get away from his assailants and run into the bush. In the bush he has sanctuary, and at the end of some time may come back to his village. The gods will not give a weakling husband, or one who is not clever enough to take his revenge when it is offered, a second chance.

At times this beating is a merry affair. This happens when the adulterer's family tries to protect him, and then the matter becomes a two-family brawl, or, if the village is a [628] large one with more than one clan substantially represented in it, it may become a fight between two clans. Once, in a village near the railhead, a man was killed in such a fight, and then white police stepped in, and the murderer went to prison.

[622] [198] A chief, however, can give the culprit sanctuary, and Asikanu, being a chief's brother, was protected by the chief while negotiations were being carried on in his behalf. Now he was sent away from home to be one of our paddlers so that the enraged husband might be dealt with—time helps to cool anger. This was important in Asikanu's case, since the husband of the woman who had gone to Asikanu would consent to no fine, however large, and seemed, furthermore, to have misgivings about the manner in which the ritual beating would be conducted. "I will kill myself," he had been heard to declare. "I will kill myself, and give them all kunu. My *yorka*—ghost—will come to

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trouble them, and I will give the family a kunu, and the clan, too, because the chief has shielded him. I am powerless against the chief. I will kill myself."

A clan kunu is a thing to dread. It must be averted, whatever the hazards. And so, while they held council at Gankwe with the husband and his family, Asikanu was away with the Bakra. . . .

776 754

At Apresina an old woman sent word that she wished to see us. She was so old and so ill that we had to cross half the length of the village to come to her, so that she might see what a white man and a white woman were like.

"Well, how is it in the city?" she asked. "How is it among you whites?"

She had heard, she told us, that everything was quiet in the city, that it was as if people slept night and day. Crops did not grow as they should. People were sick. Was it so? And without waiting for us to answer, she spoke again.

"But it must be so. So many, many black people took their own lives, before the time of running away. There must be kunu there." She assured us that it had to be so. How else but that the children of those whites should pay for the old abuses? . . .

And in the Granman's village we heard of kunu again.

"Do you know what they say in the city?" Granman Yankuso said one late afternoon, addressing several of his favorite village chiefs. "They say we are good men here in *the bush, because we believe in kunu. In the city, where* they do not believe in kunu any more, they are not afraid to use magic to enrich themselves, or hurt their neighbors. In the city they say that, friends."

There were the usual responses from the chiefs.

"So it is."

"True, true."

"Yes, master of the realm."

We looked out at the shadows across the carved door of the council house, that superb rendering of the Earth Mother and her attendant symbols of procreation and abundance, beyond into the great clearing where we could

2:Kahn D-5 (1922-1930) 1931
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sufficient time for the nitrogenous substances to be reduced to fertilizing material. Because of this poverty of the ground and the constant foraging of insect and bird pests—the parrot is notorious among these—the cultivation of food is difficult and laborious for the Bush Negroes and the provision ground must often be moved to a fresh site.

Their main carbohydrate staple is the manioc or bitter cassava. It is a tuber-like plant that grows some three to seven feet in height, the edible portion being the underground root. The root contains the poisonous prussic acid, which must be carefully removed. Bush Negroes have been known to commit suicide by drinking the juice of the cassava. The plant itself resembles the tobacco plant, but has a stalk covered with bark and large roots that look like sweet potatoes.

The roots are harvested, carefully peeled, and reduced to a pulp by being rubbed on the roughened surface of an inclined board, the expelled free juices rolling down the incline into a bowl. The rest of the plant is thrown away. The pulp is stuffed into a cylindrical squeezing contrivance made of reed, known as the *matapee*. It resembles one of those toy finger grippers of straw that children play with. The reeds being flexible, elongating the tube by pulling at the ends reduces the diameter of it; this compresses the contents of the cylinder and squeezes out the deadly juice which then runs off into a bowl below. The matapee is a beautifully woven piece of basketry about five feet long and seven inches in diameter. The upper end is attached to the limb of a tree and a heavy stone is suspended from the lower end, the

/222 cont./

976 --The Papa gadu (Vɔɔdũ). The kunu that one of them
784 exercises upon a lineage comes uniformly from the fact that in
613 times past, one of the ancestors had inadvertently killed a
[825] dagowe snake (boa), usual bearer of the Papa gadu. For example,
the snake might have perished in the burning of a clearing.
[787] Some time after, the god had possessed a member of the lineage
and revealed that henceforth it would exercise a kunu;

--The Ampuku. The kunu of an Ampuku begins in an analogous way; in days gone by an ancestor had, for example, cut a katu tree without performing the rites suitably, or had made a clearing in a place where an Ampuku was residing;

--The Kĩntamasu (who call themselves Akɔlo), gods of the termitaries, much feared, may exercise a kunu if, before cutting a clearing, someone has, in spite of all his searching, allowed a termitary to escape him, which thus was not the object of the indispensable rite;

975 --Finally, the kunu may be brought by a dead person's
784 yɔɔka. For example, a man of lineage A had once upon a time
613 unjustly accused a man of lineage B. The latter committed
762 suicide out of revenge. The meaning of this act is not the same as in Europe. It is not a question of making one's enemies live in shame and remorse, but by sacrificing one's life to cause an eternal vengeance to be wreaked upon one's enemies. Some time after the suicide, the yɔɔka reveals itself in a man of his lineage and announces that it will pursue the members of lineage A eternally with its kunu.

784 Thus the offenses which the kunu punishes are not moral sins as we understand them, but involuntary acts without inner meaning. The purifications and sacrifices demanded are likewise purely exterior acts.

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775 784 769 778 613 A yɔrka exercising a kunu may also demand that another smaller fraga tiki be erected for it beside the principal fraga tiki of its lo. In the villages of the Refugee Blacks one often sees these little crosses provided with white veils like the main fraga tiki, planted beside it a little obliquely.

775 784 674 The notion of the kunu exercised by a yɔrka explains the rarity of murder among the Refugee Blacks. How would you dare to kill someone when, as soon as it is freed from his body, his yɔrka will have full latitude to make you sick, to make tree branches fall across your path, to cause to suffer and to kill all those dear to you? If someone is blinded by hate, it is the idea of suicide which will dominate him. In October, 1952 we were able to observe this reaction in a man who had just been subject to a deep humiliation: "I am going to kill my body in order to go to kill that man and his whole family," he said to us, prey to a fit of rage; fortunately, when the fit had passed, he came back to a more sound outlook on things.

775 784 613 696 [171] It is to be noted that a yɔrka cannot exercise a kunu against its own lineage. This notion explains why, in the times when they exercised absolute authority, tribal chiefs had those condemned to death executed by men of the same lineage. Apparently similar practices were the rule in olden days in several African kingdoms, which allows one to think that notions analogous to those of the kunu may be rather widespread there.

784 613 Situation of the various lineages with respect to the kunu. There we touch on one of the most secret aspects of the social life of the Refugee Blacks. Years of living among them are necessary in order to obtain precise information on the nature and the mode of action of the kunu acting on the various lineages.

784 613 428 Nearly all the entities which now exercise their kunu on the Boni have been in their lineages since a very ancient period, to the point where the name of their first bearer is forgotten. They are transmitted inexorably from generation to generation. In the course of the ages, the kunu have accumulated, and now certain lineages are living with four, five, or even six kunu.

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784 613 776 787 Kunu of the Dju lineage. The Dju lineage in 1958 was affected by four kunu:

--An Ampuku which has exercised its vengeance since time immemorial, to the point where the origin of this kunu is no longer remembered, its bearers being Dabisa (G25) and Adyidya (E19), two women about 50 years old. This Ampuku formerly had as its bearer an ancestor named Agoabuchi, who died about 1940. Two or three years after his death, it manifested itself in Dabisa;

--A Papa gadu named Adawa which has also pursued the lineage with a pitiless vengeance since the time of the great ancestors. It revealed itself to the preceding generation in an ancestress named Sapiké (D5), and a long time after her death it passed into Pamasa (E26), a woman of 35. This kunu has grown worse since /225/ two other Papa gadu revealed themselves in recent years in two women named Kulina (F9) and Diana (E9). They declared that they were the descendants of the first one and that they came in support of it;

784 613 775 787 [162] --A yɔrka whose name nobody wanted to tell us because they were so afraid of it. It is that of a man of the Awara Bakka lineage, who committed suicide two or three generations ago when he was unjustly accused of a crime by a man of the Dju lineage. Since then, this yɔrka has been exterminating the Dju lineage little by little. Its bearer in 1958 was an old woman of the Awara Bakka lineage, named Namu;

784 613 776 787 --A Kantamasu since, a very long time ago, an ancestress whose name is forgotten inadvertently destroyed a termitary while burning a clearing. It had as bearer a very old woman named Wima (E3) († 1957), and it manifested itself also in Ata (F2).

784 613 787 562 Thus, in this group, the maleficent gods had exclusively women as bearers; out of about 20 adult women, seven were participating in the functioning of the kunu.

784 /228 cont./

613 They are the object of three kunu:

822 --One exercised by a Papa gadu god whose bearer up into

787 1956 was Kotoïda († Oct. 1956), who bequeathed it to ○ Mani (Afi lineage, d12).

784 --The other exercised by a yɔrka of the Lapé lineage.

785 This kunu dates from about 60 years ago; Alémin (Afi lineage,

613 b3, Kormotibo village), 80 years old in 1957, had when he was young cut a clearing in a place which was found to be an

[787] old abandoned Boni cemetery (opposite Maripasoula). Some time afterward, a yɔrka revealed itself in a woman of the Lapé lineage, saying that it was exercising a kunu against the family of the sacrilegious person.

[761] It is to this yɔrka, whose bearer is M... (L2, Boniville), that the death of Kotoïda in October, 1956 is especially attributed.

--A third kunu is exercised by A..., of the Papaïston 2

[684] lineage. A... had committed pikadu. Surprised by Alémin (Afi lineage), he had paid the latter to obtain his silence.

[762] But Alémin had talked. Dishonored, A... committed suicide with a gunshot; some time afterward his yɔrka revealed itself in Alémin; it exercises a kunu on this lineage.

613 Situation of the other lineages with respect to the kunu. The

614 Papaïston lineage is divided into two groups: Papaïston 1 (the

784 principal one) and Papaïston 2, of which there remain only three living members: two women and one young man. This remainder of a lineage continues to bear its own kunu, which is unique and separate from that of the principal group.

The principal group forms a unit with respect to the kunu.

The Lapé lineage, cut from the point of view of genealogy into two pieces, forms a unit with respect to the kunu. We

[114] have been able to collect only fragmentary information on the various kunu of this village.

/232 cont./

75 784 796 It is important not to confuse the kunu with the sufferings which other divinities can arbitrarily make men undergo. The kunu has a systematic character. But a divinity theoretically beneficent, and which has come into a man after being called on, may also from time to time bring misfortunes if such is its whim of the moment.

752 796 784 In 1949, G... (Dju) was busy cooking a crab in the house of his mother D... A machete which was fastened to the wall suddenly detached itself and wounded him in the right hand. Now his mother had an Ampuku which had imposed [789] [428] the crab on her as kina. This Ampuku, immediately called on, revealed that it really was it which had struck G..., for it did not like to see D...'s son eat crab (note that G... was not at all held to the observance of this kina, for no kina is transmitted from mother to son).

784 795 613 969 Neither must the kunu exercised by a yɔrka be confused with the vengeance that a dead person can exercise against the members of his own lineage in order to punish them for having neglected their duties.

Punishment inflicted by an ancestor of the lineage seems for the Boni to be a notion distinct from that of the kunu. Vengeance exercised by a yɔrka upon its own lineage is regarded as exceptional and devoid of the inexorable and definitive character of the kunu, but they assume it to be possible. They cited to us the case of Yali (Loka), who [962] committed suicide when accused of sorcery by the people [953] of his lineage. Since then, his yɔrka has caused sicknesses [961] and deaths in his own village.

796 784 613 [761] Conversely, a god which exercises the kunu upon a lineage may in certain cases intervene in favor of this lineage if such is its whim of the moment. Thus the death of Diamanti (Aw.B.2, Asisi village, † in 1955) is attributed to the god which exercises the kunu on the village of L'Enfant Perdu and whose bearer was Pééchina. Diamanti had wronged someone of this village and the god had intervened against her.

/242 cont./

754 764 787 Of course he was recognized as a wisimã by the first adjuration made to his body carried in the papay on the heads of two men: "If thou art a wisi man, do not come toward us." The dead man drew back. /2../

[784] /243/Continuation of the interrogation showed that he had not yet killed anybody, but that he had been killed by Odin when he was preparing to kill someone of his lineage.

754 The persecutors of Agyémési, contrary to their hope, did not recover after his death from the maladies which they were attributing to his sorcery; that did not shake their conviction in the least. They left for Paramaribo to have themselves treated 755 648 by a Creole magician (for the Surinam Creoles, who practice white magic and black magic indiscriminately, are by this fact reputed to be more expert than the Refugee Blacks in combating the effects of wisi).

954 In recounting this story to us, the grand man told us that it is always necessary to be cautious with accusations of wisi, [762] because one can never be sure. A man unjustly accused can [784] commit suicide and pursue his accusers with his kunu (most of the Boni state that they would do so in such a case). In former 173 times, the barbarous punishments in use in Africa were applied 683 to revealed wisimã: they were burned alive. But people tell 784 that one of them, some months afterward, undertook against his accusers' lineage a kunu which still lasts today. He had been wrongly condemned! It is through fear of the kunu more than [198] through care for humanity, that these punishments have been abolished.

754 It certainly seems that the constant fear of the wisimã in [152] which the Boni live is only a collective hallucination, and that rare indeed are those who dare to indulge in practices which might draw upon them such terrible social and religious sanctions. As for these practices themselves, they appear to be without any real content, and the misfortunes attributed to them are